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AMERICAN LIBRARY ASSOCIATION, WAUKESHA, WIS., July 3-10, 1901.

BOSTON PUBLIC LIBRARY

# THE TRUSTEESHIP OF LITERATURE.

GEORGE ILES, NEW YORK CITY.

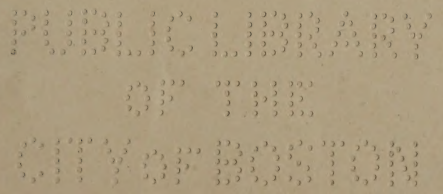
Six months ago the curtain descended upon what is likely to be accounted the most memorable century in the annals of mankind. So salient are three of its characteristics that they challenge the eye of the most casual retrospection. First of all, we see that knowledge was increased at a pace beyond precedent, to be diffused throughout the world with a new thoroughness and fidelity. Next we must observe how republican government passed from the slender ties spun in the times of Washington, Jefferson and Adams, to the intimate and pervasive cords of to-day, when, as never before, the good of the bee is bound up with the welfare of the hive. Parallel with this political union of each and all there was a growth of free organization which, in every phase of life, has secured uncounted benefits which only joined hands may receive. Fresh torches of light fraternally borne from the centers of civilization to its circumference have tended to bring the arts and ideals of life everywhere to the level of the best. These distinctive features of the nineteenth century were in little evidence at its dawn, but they became more and more manifest with each succeeding decade. In American librarianship, as in many another sphere of labor, more was accomplished in the last quarter of the century than in the seventy-five preceding years.

BOSTON PUBLIC LIBRARY

It is as recently as 1852 that Boston opened the doors of the first free public library established in an American city. Its founders were convinced that what was good for the students at Harvard, the subscribers to the Athenæum, was good for everybody else. Literature, they felt, was a trust to be administered not for a few, but for the many, to be, indeed, hospitably proffered to all. To this hour, by a wise and generous responsiveness to its ever growing duties, the Boston foundation remains a model of what a metropolitan library should be. As with the capital, so with the State; to-day Massachusetts is better provided with free public libraries than any other commonwealth on the globe; only one in two hundred of her people are unserved by them, while within her borders the civic piety of her sons and daughters has reared more than six score library buildings. The Library Commission of the State is another model in its kind; its powers are in the main advisory, but when a struggling community desires to establish a library, and contributes to that end, the Commission tenders judicious aid. The population of Massachusetts is chiefly urban, an exceptional case, for taking the Union as a whole, notwithstanding the constant drift to the cities, much more than half the people are still to be found in the country. For their behoof village libraries have appeared in thousands. Still more effective, because linked with one another, are the traveling libraries, inaugurated by Mr. Melvil Dewey in New York in 1893, and since adopted in many other States of the Union, and several provinces of Canada. All this registers how the democracy of letters has come to its own. Schools public and free ensure to the American child its birthright of instruction; libraries, also public and free, are rising to supplement that instruction, to yield the light and lift, the entertainment and stimulus that literature stands ready to bestow. The old-time

librarian, who was content to be a mere custodian of books, has passed from the stage forever; in his stead we find an officer anxious that his store shall do all the people the utmost possible good. To that end he combines the zeal of the missionary with the address of a consummate man of business. Little children are invited to cheery rooms with kind and intelligent hospitality; teachers and pupils from the public schools are welcomed to classrooms where everything is gathered that the library can offer for their use; helpful bulletins and consecutive reading lists are issued for the home circle; every book, magazine and newspaper is bought, as far as feasible, with an eye to the special wants and interests of the community; information desks are set up; and partnerships are formed with expositors of acknowledged merit, with museums of industry, of natural history, of the fine arts. Not the borrowers only, but the buyers of books are remembered. The Standard Library, brought together by Mr. W. E. Foster in Providence, is a shining example in this regard.

The sense of trusteeship thus variously displayed has had a good many sources; let us confine our attention to one of them. During the past hundred years the treasure committed to the keeping of librarians has undergone enrichment without parallel in any preceding age. We have more and better books than ever before; they mean more than in any former time for right living and sound thinking. A rough and ready classification of literature, true enough in substance, divides it into books of power, of information, and of entertainment. Let us look at these three departments a little in detail. Restricting our purview to the English tongue, we find the honor roll of its literature lengthened by the names of Wordsworth, Tennyson and Matthew Arnold, Carlyle and Ruskin, Emerson and Lowell. And not only



to authors such as these must our debt be acknowledged. We owe scholarly editors nearly as much. In Spedding's Bacon, the Shakespearian studies of Mr. Furniss, and the Chaucer of Professor Skeat, we have typical examples of services not enjoyed by any former age. To-day the supreme poets, seers and sages of all time are set before us in the clearest sunshine; their gold, refined from all admixture, is minted for a currency impossible before. In their original, unedited forms, the masterpieces of our language are now cheap enough to find their way to the lowliest cottage of the cross-roads.

It is not, however, in the field of literature pure and simple that the manna fell most abundantly during the past hundred years. Mr. Alfred Russel Wallace, the last of the great students who took all natural history for their province, declares that the advances in discovery, invention and generalization during the nineteenth century outweigh those of all preceding time. Admit this judgment, and at once is explained why the records and the spirit of science dominate the literature of the last ten decades. And let us note that while books of knowledge have increased beyond measure, they have appeared with a helpfulness and with merits wholly new. For the first time in the history of letters, men and women of successful experience, of practised and skilful pens, write books which, placed in the hands of the people, enlighten their toil, diminish their drudgery, and sweeten their lives. Cross the threshold of the home and there is not a task, from choosing a carpet to rearing a baby, that has not been illuminated by at least one good woman of authority in her theme. On the heights of the literature of science we have a quality and distinction unknown before these later days. The modern war on evil and pain displays weapons of an edge and force of which our forefathers never dared to

dream ; its armies march forward not in ignorant hope, but with the assured expectation of victory. All this inspires leaders like Huxley, Spencer and Fiske with an eloquence, a power to convince and persuade, new in the annals of human expression and as characteristic of the nineteenth century as the English poetry of the sixteenth, in the glorious era of Elizabeth. The literature of knowledge is not only fuller and better than of old, it is more wisely employed. In the class-room, and when school days are done, we now understand how the printed page may best direct and piece out the work of the hand, the eye and the ear ; not for a moment deluding ourselves with the notion that we have grasped truth merely because we can spell the word. To-day we first consider the lilies of the field, not the lilies of the printer ; that done it is time enough to take up a formal treatise which will clarify and frame our knowledge. If a boy is by nature a mechanic, a book of the right sort shows him how to construct a simple steam engine or an electric motor. Is he an amateur photographer, other books, excellently illustrated, give him capital hints for work with his camera. It is in thus rounding out the circle which springs from the school desk that the public library justifies its equal claim to support from the public treasury.

In the third and last domain of letters, that of fiction, there is a veritable embarrassment of riches. During the three generations past the art of story-telling culminated in works of all but Shakespearian depth and charm. We have only to recall Scott and Thackeray, Hawthorne, George Eliot and Thomas Hardy, to be reminded that an age of science may justly boast of novelists and romancers such as the world never knew before. No phase of life but has been limned with photographic fidelity, no realm of imagination but has been bodied forth as if by experience on fire,

so that many a book which bears the name of fiction might well be labeled as essential truth. Within the past decade, however, the old veins have approached their bounds, while new lodes do not as yet appear. Of this the tokens are the eager sifting of the rubbish heap, the elaborate picturing of the abnormal and the gross. Pens unable to afford either delight or cheer have abundant capacity, often with evident malice, to strike the nerves of horror and of pain. If at the present hour high achievement in fiction is rare, if we hear more echoes than ever and fewer voices, quantity abounds to the point of surfeit. With an output in America alone of 616 works for 1900, all fears of famine may well be allayed.

The main fact of the situation then is that the librarian's trust has of late years undergone stupendous increase; this at once broadens his opportunities and adds to his burdens. Gold and silver, iron and lead, together with much dross, are commingled in a heap which rises every hour. Before a trust can be rightly and gainfully administered, its trustees must know in detail what it is that they guard, what its several items are worth, what they are good for. And let us remember that literature consists in but small part of metals which declare themselves to all men as gold or lead; much commoner are alloys of every conceivable degree of worth or worthlessness. There is plainly nothing for it but to have recourse to the crucibles of the professional assayer, it becomes necessary to add to the titles of our catalogues some responsible word as to what the books are and what rank they occupy in an order of just precedence.

This task of a competent and candid appraisal of literature, as a necessity of its trusteeship, has been before the minds of this Association for a good many years. A notable step toward its

accomplishment was taken when Mr. Samuel S. Green, in 1879, allied himself with the teachers of Worcester, Massachusetts, that they and he together might select books for the public schools of that city. The work began and has proceeded upon comprehensive lines. Such literature has been chosen as may usefully and acceptably form part of the daily instruction, there is a liberal choice of books of entertainment and inspiration worthily to buttress and relieve the formal lessons. The whole work goes forward with intent to cultivate the taste, to widen the horizons, to elevate the impulses of the young reader. Mr. Green's methods, with the modifications needful in transplanting, have been adopted far and wide throughout the Union. Already they have borne fruit in heightening the standards of free choice when readers have passed from the school bench to the work-a-day world.

Thus thoughtfully to lay the foundation of the reading habit is a task beyond praise ; upon a basis so sound it falls to our lot to rear, if we can, a worthy and durable superstructure. It is time that we passed from books for boys and girls to books for the youth, the man and the woman. And how amid the volume and variety of the accumulated literature of the ages shall we proceed? For light and comfort let us go back a little in the history of education, we shall there find a method substantially that of our friend, Mr. Green. Long before there were any free public libraries at all, we had in America a small band of readers and learners who enjoyed unfailing pilotage in the sea of literature. These readers and learners were in the colleges, where the teachers from examination and comparison in the study, the class-room and the laboratory were able to say that such an author was the best in his field, that such another had useful chapters, and that a third was unreliable or superseded. While literature has been growing from much

to more, this bench of judicature has been so enlarged as to keep steadily abreast of it. At Harvard there are twenty-six sub-libraries of astronomy, zoology, political economy, and so on ; at hand are the teachers who can tell how the books may be used with most profit. Of the best critics in America of books the larger part are to be found at Harvard, at its sister universities and colleges, at the technological institutes and art schools of our great cities. We see their signed reviews in such periodicals as the *Political Science Quarterly* and the *Physical Review ;* or unsigned in journals of the stamp of the *Nation*. Fortunately, we can call upon reinforcements of this vanguard of criticism. It would be difficult to name a branch of learning, an art, a science, an exploration, from folk-lore to forestry, from psychical research to geological surveys, whose votaries are not to-day banded to promote the cause they have at heart. These organizations include not only the foremost teachers in the Union, but also their peers, outside the teaching profession, of equal authority in bringing literature to the balances. And the point for us is that these societies, through their publications and discussions, enable these laymen to be known for what they are. Because the American Historical Association is thus comprehensive, its membership has opened the door for an initial task of appraisal, important in itself and significant for the future.

Drawing his two score contributors almost wholly from that Association, Mr. J. N. Larned of Buffalo, an honored leader of ours, has, without fee or reward, acted as chief editor of an annotated Bibliography of American History. The work in now passing through the composing room of Houghton, Mifflin & Co., of Boston ; its contributors include professors of history at Bowdoin, Bryn Mawr, Columbia, Harvard, McGill, Toronto, Tulane and Yale, as well as the Universities of Michigan, Wisconsin and Chi-

cago; our own Association is worthily represented by Messrs. James Bain, Clarence S. Brigham, V. L. Collins, W. E. Foster, J. K. Hosmer, E. C. Richardson and R. G. Thwaites. As a rule the notes are signed. Where for any reason a book demanding notice could not be allotted to a contributor, Mr. Larned has quoted the fairest review he could find in print. He has included not only good books, but such other works as have found an acceptance they do not deserve. All told his pages will offer us about 3,100 titles; a syllabus of the sources of American History is prefixed by Mr. Paul Leicester Ford; as an appendix will appear a feature also of great value. In their Guide to American History, published in 1896, Professors Channing and Hart of Harvard University recommended such collections of books as may be had for five, ten, twenty, fifty, or a hundred dollars. Professor Channing is kind enough to say that he will revise these lists and bring them down to date as a contribution to Mr. Larned's work. Professor Channing may, we trust, name the books in each collection in the order in which they may be most gainfully read.

In times past our bibliographies have begun to need enlargement the moment they left the bindery; in the present case that need is for the first time to be supplied. Mr. Larned's titles come to the close of 1899; beyond that period current literature is to be chosen from and appraised with the editorship of Mr. Philip P. Wells, librarian of the Yale Law Library, who will issue his series in card form. We hope that he may be ready with his cards for 1900 at the time that Mr. Larned's book appears. Thereafter Mr. Wells' series will probably be published quarter by quarter. Beginning with 1897, Mr. W. Dawson Johnston, now of the Library of Congress, has edited for us a series of annotated cards dealing with the contemporary literature of English history. Both the

form and substance of his series are capital. In so far as his cards go directly into catalogue cases, where readers and students must of necessity see them, they render the utmost possible aid. If subscribers in sufficient array come forward, Mr. Larned's book may be remolded for issue in similar card form, with a like opportunity for service in catalogue cases. In the Cleveland Public Library and its branches useful notes are pasted within the lids of a good many volumes. It is well thus to put immediately under the reader's eye the word which points him directly to his goal, or prevents him wasting time in wanderings of little value or no value at all.

With Mr. Larned's achievement a new chapter is opened in American librarianship; he breaks a path which should be followed up with a discernment and patience emulous of his example. If the whole working round of our literature were sifted and labeled after his method, the worth of that literature, because clearly brought into evidence, might well be doubled at least. Every increase in the availability of our books, every removal of fences, every setting-up of guide-posts, has had a heartening public response. So it will be if we proceed with this effort to bring together the seekers and the knowers, to obtain the best available judgments for the behoof of readers and students everywhere. Economics and politics, so closely interwoven with American history, might well afford the second field for appraisal. A good many libraries still find aid in the *Reader's Guide* in this department, although it appeared as long ago as 1890. Next might follow the literature of the sciences pure and applied, together with the useful arts. Among useful arts those of the household might well have the lead, for we must not be academic, or ever lose sight of the duties nearest at hand to the great body of the plain people.

Mr. Sturgis and Mr. Krehbiel, in 1897, did an excellent piece of work for us in their Bibliography of the Fine Arts; their guide might profitably be revised and enlarged in its several divisions, not omitting the introductory paragraphs which make the book unique in its class. These tasks well in hand, we might come to such accessions of strength and insight as to nerve us for labors of wider range and greater difficulty, where personal equations may baffle even the highest court of appeal, where it is opinion rather than fact that is brought to the scales. I refer to the debatable ground of ethics, philosophy and theology; and, at the other pole of letters, to the vast stretches of fiction and belles lettres in our own and foreign tongues. With regard to fiction and belles lettres, one of Mr. Larned's methods has a hint for us. In some cases he has found it best to quote Mr. Francis Parkman, Mr. Justin Winsor, or the pages of the *Nation*, the *Dial*, the *American Historical Review*, and similar trustworthy sources. With respect to novels and romances, essays and literary interpretation, it does not seem feasible to engage a special corps of reviewers. It may be a good plan to appoint judicious editors to give us composite photographs of what the critics best worth heeding have said in the responsible press.

It is in the preponderant circulation of fiction, and fiction for the most part of poor quality, that the critics of public libraries find most warrant for attack. They point to the fact that many readers of this fiction are comparatively well-to-do, and are exempted by public taxation from supporting the subscription library and the bookseller. The difficulty has been met chiefly in two ways; by curtailing the supply of mediocre and trashy fiction; by exacting a small fee on issuing the novels brought for a season to a huge demand by advertising of a new address and prodigality.

Appraisal, just and thorough, may be expected to render aid more important because radical instead of superficial. In the first place, the best books of recreation, now overlaid by new and inferior writing, can be brought into prominence; secondly, an emphasis, as persuasive as it can be made, ought to be placed upon the more solid stores of our literature. "Business," said Bagehot long ago, "is really more agreeable than pleasure; it interests the whole mind, the aggregate nature of man more continuously and deeply, but it does not look as if it did." Let it be our purpose to reveal what admirable substance underlies appearances not always seductive to the casual glance. Lowell and Matthew Arnold, Huxley and John Fiske, Lecky and Goldwin Smith are solid enough, yet with no lack of wit or humor to relieve their argument and elucidation. A New York publisher of wide experience estimates that the average American family, apart from school purchases, buys less than two books a year. Newspapers and magazines form the staple of the popular literary diet. What fills the newspapers is mainly news; their other departments of information are often extensive and admirable, but within the limits of the hastily penned paragraph or column they cannot rise to the completeness and quality of a book carefully written and faithfully revised. The plain fact is, and it behooves us to reckon with it, the average man, to whom we bear our credentials as missionaries, looks upon a book as having something biblical about it. To sit down deliberately and surrender himself to its chapters is a task he waves away with strangely mingled awe and dislike. So he misses the consecutive instruction, as delightful as profitable to an educated taste, which authors, publishers and librarians are ready and even anxious to impart.

We hear a good deal in these days about the need of recreation, and not a word more than is true, but let us remember that the

best recreation may consist in a simple change of work. Behold the arduous toil of the city lawyer, or banker, as on a holiday tour he climbs a peak of the Alps or the Adirondacks, or wades the chilly streams of Scotland or Canada a salmon rod in his hands. Why does he undergo fatigues so severe? Partly because they are freely chosen, partly because they are fatigues of an unwonted and therefore refreshing kind. So in the field before us to-day. Truth is not only stranger than fiction, it is more fascinating when once its charms are recognized and entertained. Our public schools throughout the land prove that a true story of exploration, of invention or discovery, of heroism or adventure, has only to be well told to rivet a boy's attention as firmly as ever did Robinson Crusoe or Treasure Island. When readers take up from instinctive appetite, or wise incitement, the best books about flowers or birds, minerals or trees, an art, a science, a research, they come to joys in new knowledge, in judgments informed and corrected, unknown to the tipplers and topers whose staple is the novel, good, bad and indifferent. And why, if we can help it, should public money ever be spent for aught but the public good?

With a new sense of what is implied in the trusteeship of literature, if we endeavor in the future to ally ourselves with the worthiest critics of books, we must bid good-bye to the temporary expedients which have cramped and burdened our initial labors. The work of the appraisal of literature requires a home, a Central Bureau, with a permanent and adequately paid staff of editors and assistants. The training of such a staff has already begun; in addition to the experience acquired by those enlisted in our present bibliographical tasks, instruction is now given in advanced bibliography at the New York State Library School at Albany, and doubtless also at other library schools. And at the Central

Bureau, which we are bold enough to figure to ourselves, much more should be done than to bring books to the balances. At such a home, in New York, Washington, or elsewhere, every other task should proceed which aims at furthering the good that literature can do all the people. There might be conducted the coöperative cataloguing now fast taking form; there should be extended the series of useful tracts begun by that of Dr. G. E. Wire on *How to Start a Library*, by Mr. F. A. Hutchins on *Traveling Libraries*. At such a center should be exhibited everything to inform the founder of a public library; everything to direct the legislator who would create a Library Commission on the soundest lines, or recast library laws in the light of national experience; there, moreover, should be gathered everything to arouse and instruct the librarian who would bring his methods to the highest plane. Thence, too, should go forth the speakers and organizers intent upon awakening torpid communities to a sense of what they miss so long as they stand outside our ranks, or lag at the rear of our movement. In the fullness of time such a Bureau might copy the Franklin Society of Paris, and call into existence a needed book, to find within this Association a sale which, though small, would be adequate, because free from the advertising taxes of ordinary publishing. To found and endow such a Bureau would undoubtedly cost a great deal, and where is the money to come from? We may, I think, expect it from the sources which have given us thousands of public libraries, great and small. Here is an opportunity for our friends, whether their surpluses be large or little. When a gift can be accompanied by personal aid and counsel, it comes enriched. It is much when a goodly gift provides a city with a library, it would be yet more if the donation were to establish and maintain an agency to lift libraries every-

where to the highest efficiency possible, to give literature for the first time its fullest acceptance, its utmost fruitage.

In a retrospective glance at nineteenth century science, Professor Haeckel has said that the hundred years before us are not likely to witness such victories as those which have signalized the era just at an end. Assume for a moment that his forecast is sound, and that it applies beyond the immediate bounds of science, what does it mean for librarianship? It simply reinforces what in any case is clear, namely, that it is high time that the truth and beauty of literature known to the few, made its way to all the people, for their enlightenment, consolation and delight. If the future battles of science are to be waged less strenuously than of yore, if scholarship has measurably exhausted its richest mines, let us give the broadest diffusion to the fruits of their triumphs past. In thus diffusing the leaven of culture the public library should take a leading, not a subordinate part. Its treasure is vaster and more precious than ever before. The world's literature grows much like the world's stock of gold, every year's winning is added to the mass already heaped together at the year's first day. In the instruction, entertainment and inspiration of every man and woman there is a three-fold ministry, that of art, of science, and of letters. Because letters bring to public appreciation, to popular sympathy, both art and science, and this in addition to their own priceless argosies, may we not say that of art, science and letters, the greatest of these is letters?

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